RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

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GOVERNANCE IN ORGANIZATIONS ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS

Introduction

Organizations working to address the needs of the homeless are under tremendous pressure to serve an increasing number of people with diverse needs. They are also struggling with limited resources and find themselves coping with changes in the level and nature of government funding. Organizational governance, both its quality and nature, is a key factor in the ability of organizations to address the needs of the homeless in this challenging environment.

In an organizational setting governance refers to the overall processes and structures used to direct and manage an organization's operations and activities. Encompassing roles, responsibilities, powers, partnerships and accountability, the essence of governance is captured by such questions as: Who is in charge? Who sets direction? Who makes decisions? Who monitors progress? Who is accountable for the performance of the organization? With whom and in what fashion does the agency partner and collaborate?

Methodology

The research included a literature review and case studies:

- Victory Over Violence Emergency Teen Shelter, Nova Scotia
- Interchurch Housing Society, Nova Scotia
- Cape Breton Transition House Association, Nova Scotia
- Auberge Communautaire du Sud-Ouest, Montreal, Quebec
- Homes First Society, Toronto, Ontario
- Main Street Project, Winnipeg, Manitoba
- Calgary Drop In Centre, Alberta
- Victoria Cool Aid Society, B.C.

Most of these agencies provide both crisis/emergency shelter and transitional housing, as well as support programs and services. Half of them provide permanent housing as well.

A three stage survey was used:

1. Pre-survey information collection: collection of data accessible from public information sources including other studies, annual reports, program pamphlets, directory information, and from on-line sources such as web pages. The accuracy and current applicability of the information was confirmed during stages two and three.
2. The self-administered questionnaire: collection of basic data about the organization that was not readily available from any other source. At least two key contacts were arranged for each agency; generally a key staff member (the Executive Director) and a board member.
3. The interview: in-person interview used to collect more complex subjective data. The interview was designed to probe key issues from both senior staff and board members of the agency and also to delve into more detail on critical governance issues.

Findings

Although there are many different models of governance, every organization is different and there is no one particular model that applies to all organizations. However, from the case study analysis undertaken

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it is clear that organizations work most effectively when there is a model that encourages a commitment to a clear direction and vision; organizational capacity, appropriate structures, policies and procedures to achieve this direction; accountability to funders and community stakeholders; sufficient adaptability to meet changing circumstances; the ability of the organization to develop and maintain effective partnerships; and the ability of the board and staff to work as a team.

The case study analysis identified a variety of strategies, partnerships, structures and tools that help to achieve effective governance. A strategic plan seems to be of paramount importance. It is a critical tool in establishing vision and direction, identifying priorities, critical issues, barriers and opportunities. It can, and should, provide guidelines for program planning and delivery, and incorporate effective monitoring of both the internal and external environment. Monitoring and evaluation are critical to successful governance.

Other key elements of governance structure include a Board that is committed to the philosophy of the organization, brings a range of expertise to the table, and has the ability and commitment to work on behalf of the organization seeking out other partners and sources of funding and playing a significant role in setting policy and direction. Boards can be "hands on", taking an active role in day to day operation, or focus more on setting broad policy and direction and developing overall guidelines for operation. Although both approaches have strengths and weaknesses, boards operating at the macro level appear to be most effective. Boards appear to operate best when there is a clear framework for decision-making, including the necessary background information; possible options; and implications of various options and recommendations.

Formal committees, usually chaired by a board member, must be in place to deal with key issues such as finance, human resources, strategic planning and programs. Meetings of both the board and committees, with adequate record keeping, should be held regularly, preferably monthly. There should be clear lines of communication and regular contact between the board and staff, preferably through the Executive Director or other senior staff members.

Moving from the board to the operational staff of agencies, the case study analysis suggests a flexible and non-rigid organizational structure works best given the rapidly changing circumstances and challenges these organizations face. The important characteristics appear to be open, non-micro management that encourages collaboration within the organization and with other partners.

The case study analysis also suggests that volunteers are a means of strengthening an organization and building capacity, particularly in a time of limited resources. Volunteers can also strengthen ties to the community and play a role in developing effective partnerships. However, effective use of volunteers requires administrative time, clear policies and procedures and the need to address issues such as liability, training and union regulations.

Training for both staff and volunteers is clearly needed to achieve effective governance. It helps staff and volunteers deal more effectively with clients, improves staff retention and the opportunity for promotion. Adequate training can also develop job skills that are inter-changeable, with the ability to cover various jobs, share workloads and provide opportunities for job rotation.

Types of Boards of Directors

Agency	Type
Auberge du Sud-Ouest	Policy board; day-to-day operations left to the Executive Director (ED).
Homes First	Policy board; day-to-day operations left to the ED.
Main Street Project	In transition from managing operations to becoming a policy board; day-to-day operations handled by ED under the guidance of Board policies and procedures.
Calgary Drop-In	Policy/advisory board; day-to-day operations handled by ED.
Cool Aid	Evolved over the years from an operational board to a policy board; day-to-day operations handled by ED.
Victory Over Violence	Management board with a "hands-on" management style.
Interchurch Housing Society	Evolved from an active management-directed board to an advisory board once staff were hired; current president helps with many administrative tasks and "clearly steers" the organization's day-to-day operations as well as its overall direction.
Cape Breton Transition House Assn.	Evolved from a hands-on board acting as a steering committee to a combination of advisory and management board.

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Although the case study organizations were quick to point out that it was not all about money, nearly all organizations face financial problems because of the increasing demand for services. The ability to diversify the funding base, develop fundraising capacity and entrepreneurial skills, and establish a sustainable business plan were highlighted as key characteristics of good governance. Organizations must have the capacity to pursue a range of revenue generating strategies. The issue of fundraising deserves special comment. Although many organizations undertake fundraising initiatives directed at the general public and private sector corporations, and one organization has hired a professional fundraiser, the opinions on the value of fundraising were mixed. Some saw it as a crucial component of their business plan and long-term strategy. Others questioned the effectiveness of fundraising. The time, cost and effort required to run an effective fundraising campaign may be beyond the capacity of smaller organizations or those organizations with more limited resources.

Partnerships

Finally, the importance of strategic partnerships in promoting effective governance cannot be understated. Strategic partnerships play a critical role in the effective operation of resource constrained agencies serving the homeless. Partnerships comprise: coalitions of agencies working to address the community's larger goals, including those coalitions established under the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI); relationships with municipal and other levels of government; partnerships with the private sector; and other less formal collaborations and networking arrangements with a wide range of agencies as part of improving the quality of services and information.

Formal and informal partnerships are increasingly important to agencies in developing support networks, setting community priorities, developing solutions to problems that require a diverse range of services, improving access to other sources of funding, making more efficient use of the funds available, and lobbying government and other funding agencies to increase resources. Although it takes time and effort to build and make partnerships work there was a consensus that expanded, and sometimes very complex, partnership arrangements were necessary in responding to the increasing needs the organizations face.

For those organizations that have tended to operate on their own with less reliance on partnerships, developing effective partnerships will be a capacity building exercise. This may be a difficult process, requiring changes to the board structure, and incorporating new ideas on the operation of the organization. The SCPI process is seen to have promoted capacity building through the development of collaborative processes and broad local partnerships among all stakeholders, private, non-profit and voluntary sectors and government. Effective partnerships are a key component of good governance.

Conclusions

The case study analysis suggests that, in the face of significant challenges, organizations dealing with the homeless are able to persevere and adapt to rapidly changing circumstances. Good governance and the development of strategic partnerships as part of governance are key components of this success.

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